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EDUCATION WEEK[®]
American Education's Newspaper of Record

2004 NATIONAL SURVEY OF PUBLIC OPINION

Learn. Vote. Act.

The Public's Responsibility
for Public Education



Funded by a grant from

MetLife Foundation

Public Education Network (PEN) is a national organization of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. PEN and its 89 LEF members work in 34 states and the District of Columbia on behalf of 11.1 million children in more than 1,200 school districts, seeking to bring the community voice into the debate on quality public education in the firm belief that an active, vocal constituency will ensure every child, in every community, a quality public education. As part of its efforts to bolster public responsibility for public schools, PEN conducts opinion research on citizen involvement; has launched an e-advocacy website, GiveKidsGoodSchools.com, to encourage individuals to take action; and is hosting a national Forum on Public Responsibility for Public Education that will bring together more than 35 leaders from various sectors of society.

Education Week is the newspaper of record for American precollegiate education. Produced by the nonprofit Editorial Projects in Education, based in Bethesda, MD, this independent newspaper is now in its 23rd publishing year. *Education Week* is well known for its annual *Quality Counts* report on the state of school reform in the 50 states, as well as for its award-winning coverage of news in the nation's public and private schools.

MetLife Foundation, which provided funding for this poll report, was founded in 1976 by MetLife and supports national programs that increase opportunities for young people to succeed, give students and teachers a voice in improving education, develop partnerships between schools and communities, and strengthen relationships among parents, teachers, and students.

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INTRODUCTION

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Education Week

Over the past several years, Public Education Network and *Education Week* (PEN/Ed Week) have systematically explored the degree to which the American public takes responsibility for quality public education, and the degree to which the public holds itself and its elected officials accountable for promoting policies that support quality education for all children. We have examined the priority the public places on education, what voters want from elected officials, and what citizens, including the 75 percent of adults who do not have children in school, have done and are willing to do to improve public education.

This year's PEN/Ed Week poll, conducted with funding from the MetLife Foundation, reveals that the American public continues to see education as a vital national priority, an important investment in the future, and a major issue in the upcoming local, state, and national elections.

What is particularly striking and encouraging is that, through the years, voters across all demographic groups have viewed public schools as the center of their community, and have placed a high value on public education. They see public education as the key to individual opportunity, economic growth, and community well-being. This year, even in a time of war and with concern over joblessness, the economy, and healthcare, education is nonetheless at the top of the public's "to-do" list.

Another key poll finding is the critical role that information plays in every aspect of public schooling—from ascertaining progress in school improvement, to ensuring that schools have the resources required to get the job done. Which tells us that, if we want people to take greater responsibility for public schools by taking civic action, or voting, or volunteering, we have to make sure they have reliable information on education issues. Americans need more information on what is happening in local schools, how effective their communities are in supporting quality public education, and what elected officials are doing to improve local schools.

The public's responsibility for public education can be summed up in three words: Learn. Vote. Act. Public responsibility requires voters to learn what is going on in their schools, in their communities, in school boardrooms, city halls, and state capitols. It also requires people to vote for candidates that support quality public schools, and to act in a civic capacity to make schools better for all young people.

An Attentive Public

Like the neighbor who watches out for all children on the block, Americans are paying close attention to what goes on in their public schools, and they are doing a lot to bolster the quality of the education delivered in those schools. They are voting for tax increases, discussing education issues with friends and neighbors, following school board activities, and signing petitions calling for improvement. They are also very concerned about state budgets and believe that public education is under funded at all levels. They want public education funding to be protected from budget cuts, and they are willing to pay more taxes to support public education.

Their attentiveness to education issues can also be seen in their growing awareness of the No Child Left Behind Act. We began tracking this major piece of education legislation last year to determine voter reaction to the law and to see how NCLB is affecting public schools and communities. Not surprisingly, we found that significantly more voters have heard about the law this year and that they are attuned to some key NCLB implementation challenges.

Community Commitment

Americans see their communities as generally supportive of public education. When asked how active their local community is in supporting its local public schools, the majority of respondents say their community is very active or somewhat active and more than half say their community has come together to work on a public education issue.

This year's poll identifies activities the public believes should occur in every community that wants to have quality public schools. It also presents new data on attributes that are indicative of an engaged community that actively supports its public schools. Public Education Network is using this data to create a new measurement tool so that communities can assess how well they are doing when it comes to taking responsibility for the quality of education delivered in their public schools. Several local education funds will test this civic index tool in their communities in the coming year.

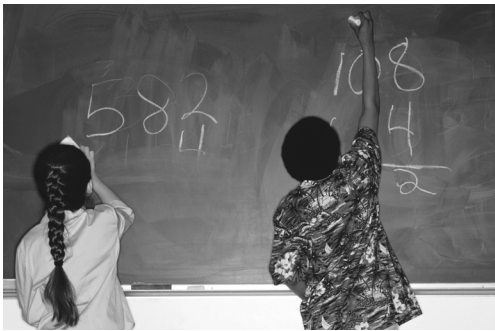
One thing is clear: responsibility for quality public schooling for all children cannot be left to parents, educators, and students alone. It is everyone's responsibility to make sure all children receive a quality public education. This requires more focused community action, better information about education issues, adequate and stable financial resources, and elected officials at all levels who are held accountable for what they do to strengthen our system of public education. Our polls tell us that Americans are ready to take on these challenges.



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. Education continues to be a top national priority, even in the midst of war and concern about the economy, joblessness, and healthcare.

- ▶ Education ranks second only to the economy and jobs as the biggest concern of registered voters. Voter concern over these two issues has remained constant over the last three years of the poll. When asked what concerns them the most, voters rank the economy and jobs first (27 percent in 2004, 26 percent in 2002); followed by education (15 percent in 2004, 16 percent in 2002); then healthcare (13 percent in 2004, 8 percent in 2002); then terrorism and security (8 percent in 2004, 13 percent in 2002).



2. Americans want funding for public education protected from budget cuts, and they want to see more public investment in education.

- ▶ The public wants education protected from possible state budget cuts. Twice as many voters in every demographic group say they want to protect education from budget cuts than they want to protect their next highest priority.
- ▶ When asked which education programs they want to see protected, voters focus primarily on areas requiring significant investment such as early childhood education, reduced class size, and teacher pay.
- ▶ Americans don't believe there is enough spending at either the local or national level to ensure quality in public education. The majority of voters (59 percent) say the federal government has not committed enough money to public education in their community; approximately the same percentage says there is insufficient federal funding for all public schools nationally.

3. Voters pay attention to education issues and carefully watch the degree to which elected officials make education a priority. Presidential candidates and other candidates who make education the centerpiece of their administration can gain traction with swing voters.

- ▶ Nearly 60 percent of voters say they are more likely to vote for a presidential candidate who has education as an administration centerpiece. Irrespective of demographics or political affiliation, the majority of respondents say they are more likely to support candidates that place education at the forefront of their agendas. Independents, voters under 30, and homemakers are most likely to support pro-education candidates.
- ▶ More than 80 percent of voters say they want a president who puts full funding for Head Start, class size reduction, protecting the federal budget from education cuts, and increasing teacher pay at the center of any plan for improving education.
- ▶ About half of all voters (46 percent) say that a candidate is very sincere or somewhat sincere in claiming to be an education candidate. This result has stayed roughly the same over the last several years.



4. The jury is still out on No Child Left Behind.

- ▶ Significantly more people have heard about the law this year than last. In 2004, about three quarters (75 percent) say they have heard of the law, compared to little more than half (56 percent) in 2003.
- ▶ While the percentage of voters who say they favor the

law has remained fairly steady—the favorable rating dropped slightly from 40 percent to 36 percent over the past year—the percentage of voters who say they oppose the law has increased by 20 percentage points. In 2003, 8 percent of voters said they opposed the law. This year, 28 percent say they oppose it, including 18 percent who say they strongly oppose it.

- ▶ Voters are concerned about funding, and about provisions that require special-needs students to take the same tests and perform to the same standards as students without disabilities. Many are also uncomfortable with provisions that hold students with limited English skills to the same standards as native English speakers.
- ▶ Americans have mixed views on President Bush's performance in the education area. Over half (52 percent) disapprove of Bush's record on education, including 25 percent who think he is doing a poor job. Some 45 percent of Americans believe the President is doing a good job on education, including 10 percent who rate his performance as excellent.



5. Voters say their communities are active in improving schools and that they personally have taken action to improve the quality of their schools.

- ▶ The poll found that about three-quarters of voters (72 percent) believe their community is very active or somewhat active in supporting public schools; 68 percent say their community overall takes a lot or some responsibility for the quality of its public schools; and more than half (57 percent) say their community has come together to work on a public education issue.

- ▶ Voters say they are most likely to support public schools by attending local events such as sporting events or student performances (61 percent); talking to friends and neighbors about education (56 percent); following the activities of the school board (54 percent); signing a petition (50 percent); or voting for an increase in local education funding (48 percent).
- ▶ Voters are far more likely to take civic action and be attentive to education issues than to volunteer. One-third of voters (32 percent) say they raise money for local schools; 27 percent belong to a school improvement organization; 17 percent tutor children; 13 percent campaign for candidates who are committed to improving public schools.



6. Voters say strong parental involvement and leadership from elected officials are key determinants of community commitment to quality public education for all children.

- ▶ Voters identify high levels of parental involvement, strong leadership from office holders, young people who are aware of their civic responsibilities and active in their communities, and higher education and cultural institutions that use their resources to enhance learning opportunities for young people as crucial indicators of communities that take responsibility for education. PEN will use this data to create a new measurement tool that every community can use to determine how well it takes responsibility for education in its public schools.

POLL FINDINGS

“Americans are taking action to develop and support quality schools in thousands of communities across the nation. And where parents, other residents, and entire communities take responsibility for the quality of public education, good things happen for schools and young people.”

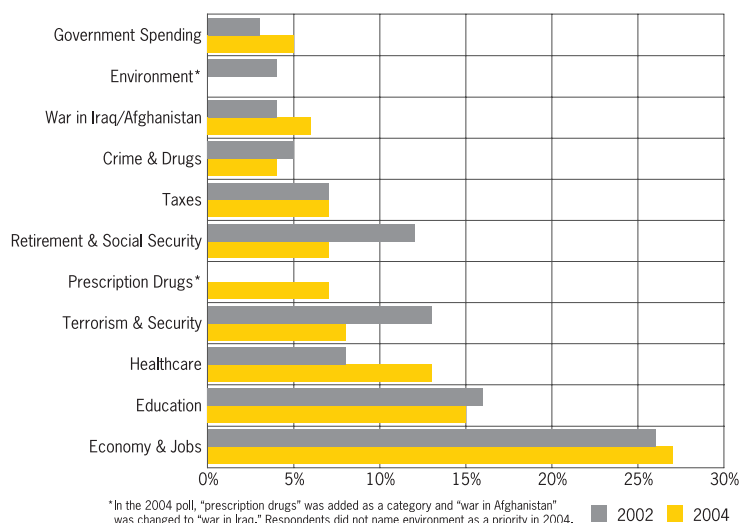
– The Honorable Richard W. Riley,
former U.S. Secretary of Education

Learn. Vote. Act. *The Public’s Responsibility for Public Education*, the fifth national PEN/Ed Week public opinion survey, shows that public education remains a high priority for voters and a core value they expect elected officials to support not just with words, but with dollars, leadership, and legislation.

While voters are most concerned about the state of the economy and jobs, the poll shows that education is their second greatest concern. Since 2002, voter concern over these two issues has remained consistent. When asked what concerns them the most, they rank the economy and jobs first (27 percent in 2004, 26 percent in 2002); followed by education (15 percent in 2004, 16 percent in 2002); then healthcare (13 percent in 2004, 8 percent in 2002).

Terrorism and security appear to have become second tier issues, receding as a top concern in the American consciousness. In this year’s poll, only 8 percent rank terrorism and security a top concern, compared to 13 percent just two years ago. Taxes, prescription drugs, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and crime and drugs do not rank as major voter concerns.

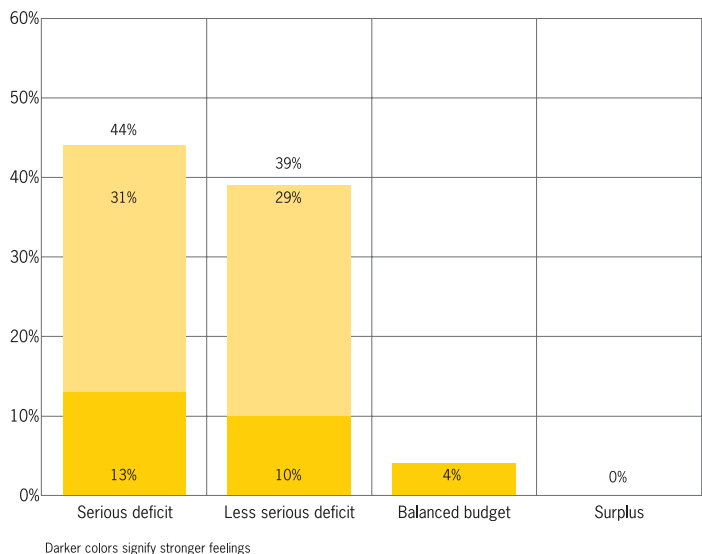
■ ■ Voters’ National Priorities



State Budgets

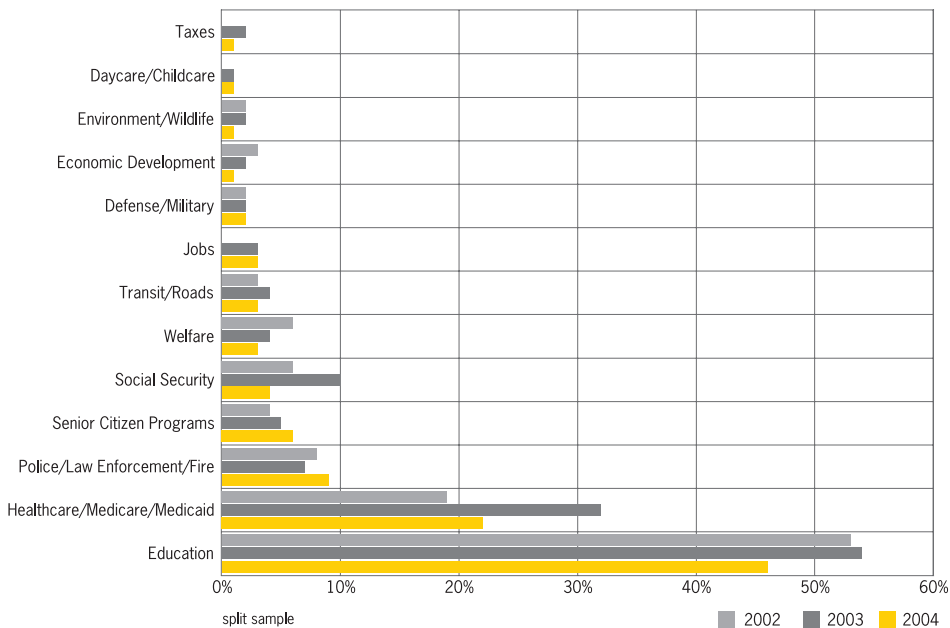
In previous PEN/Ed Week polls, voters were very pessimistic about state finances. This pessimism was expressed in concern about the impact of state deficits on their community in general and on their public schools in particular. In this year’s poll, concern about state finances lessened somewhat, but voters remain committed to keeping state spending for education on the “do-not-touch” list should cuts become necessary. Last year, 90 percent of respondents believed their state faced a budget deficit in the coming year, and 58 percent of them believed the deficit would be serious. This year, 83 percent say they expect a state budget deficit in the coming year, with approximately 44 percent saying they expect the deficit to be serious.

Voters Are Concerned About State Budgets



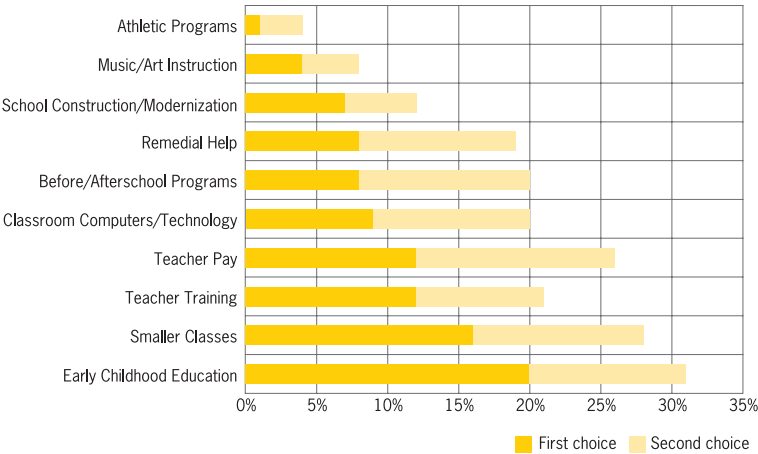
If program cuts are necessary, voters say they should not be made in education. Support for keeping education safe from budget cuts has remained relatively constant, despite increasingly difficult economic conditions and rising levels of joblessness. Responding to an open-ended question about programs they would most like to see protected from budget cuts, nearly half of voters (46 percent) say they want to protect education funding. Though this is a decline from the 54 percent who responded affirmatively in 2002, no other spending program comes close to the degree of support that education enjoys.

Top Programs Voters Want Protected



When asked about specific public education programs they would like to see protected, respondents named areas that require significant investment such as early childhood education, class size reduction, and teacher pay.

■ ■ **Voter Education Budget Priorities**



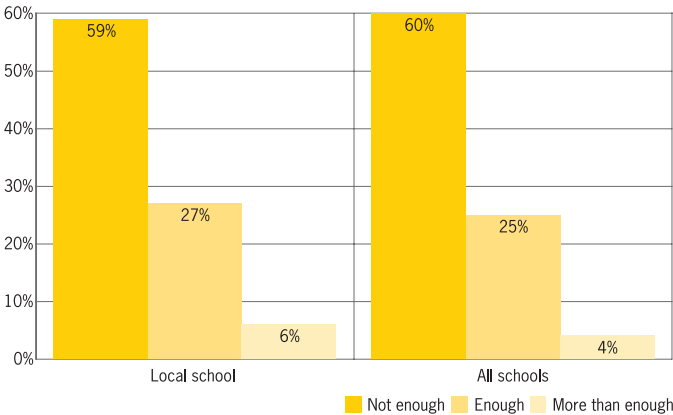
“Americans understand that the future of this country depends on having an educated citizenry. The public is willing to do what it takes to make sure all kids have a good education.”

– Wendy D. Puriefoy
President, Public Education Network

Funding and Taxes

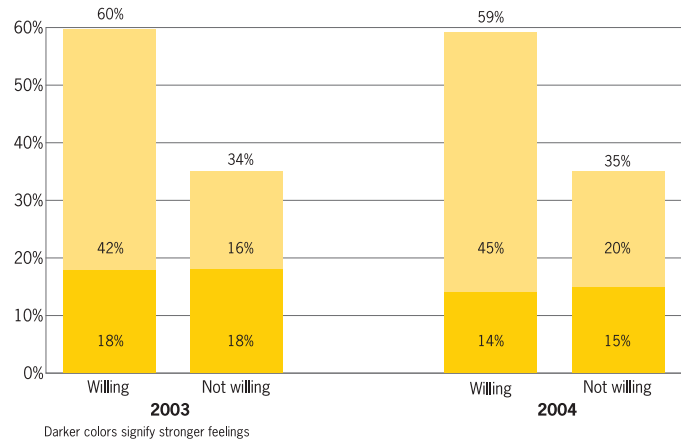
A clear sign of voter commitment to public education is acknowledgement of the need to spend more money, even if that means raising taxes. Voters do not believe that the federal government is adequately funding public education. The majority of voters (59 percent) say there is not enough federal funding for education in their community, and about the same percent say there is insufficient federal funding for public education nationally.

■ ■ **Voter Perceptions of Education Funding**



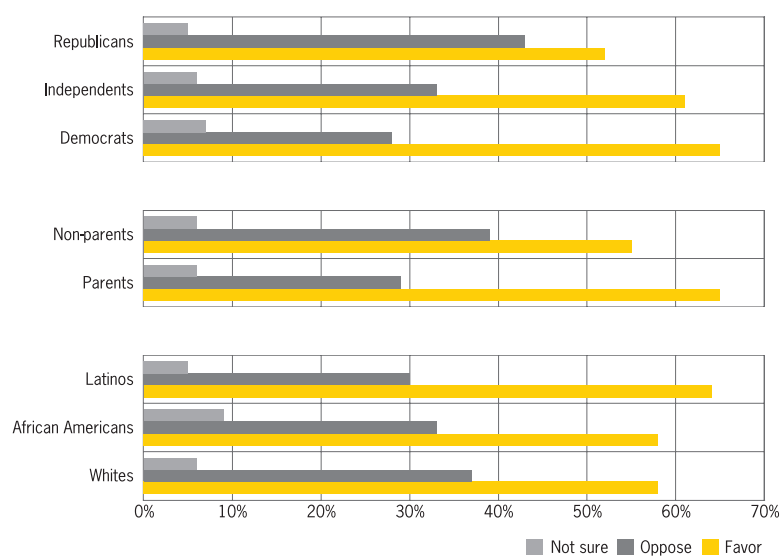
Despite the financial pinch many people are feeling, the majority of voters (59 percent) say they are willing to pay higher taxes to improve public education. Their responses are consistent with those of a year ago, although the intensity of willingness has diminished somewhat.

■ ■ Voter Attitudes Toward Tax Increases



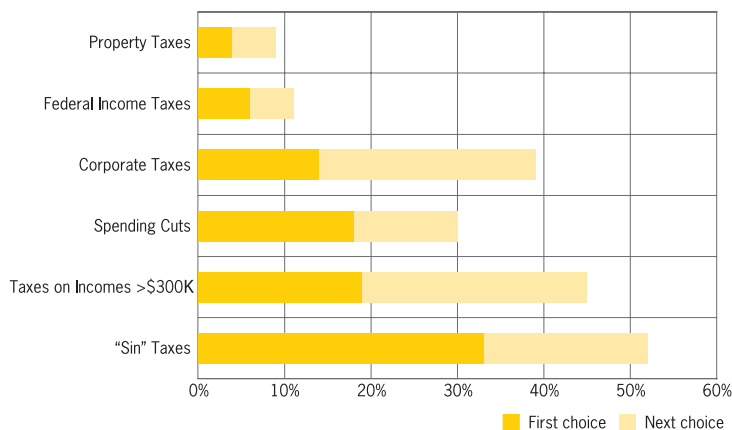
Willingness to pay higher taxes for education breaks along party lines, with Democrats showing more of a willingness to pay higher taxes than independents or Republicans. Latinos are more willing to pay higher taxes than any other demographic group, and parents are more willing than non-parents (defined as adults with no children age 18 or younger) to pay higher taxes, although the majority (55 percent) of non-parents nonetheless say they are willing to pay more taxes.

■ ■ Voter Willingness to Raise Taxes



As might be expected, voters are more open to supporting tax increases that do not impact them directly. More than half would like to see additional education dollars raised from so-called “sin” taxes on alcohol and tobacco products, and about 44 percent say they favor raising taxes for wealthy families. Few support increasing taxes that hit closer to home such as federal income taxes or local property taxes.

■ ■ Taxes the Public Would Increase



At the state level, raising taxes is not a matter of idle speculation. According to a December 2003 report from the National Association of State Budget Officers, 19 states increased taxes on tobacco or alcohol for fiscal year 2004, 9 states increased income taxes, and 13 states increased sales taxes.

Holding Elected Officials Accountable

From presidential aspirants to small-town mayors, everyone wants to be known as the candidate who will do the most to protect and improve the quality of public education. Voters, however, are suspicious of these claims.

When it comes to politicians who claim to be education candidates, only 5 percent of voters judge such candidates as being very sincere, while 41 percent say they believe such candidates are somewhat sincere. This response has been roughly the same for the past several years.

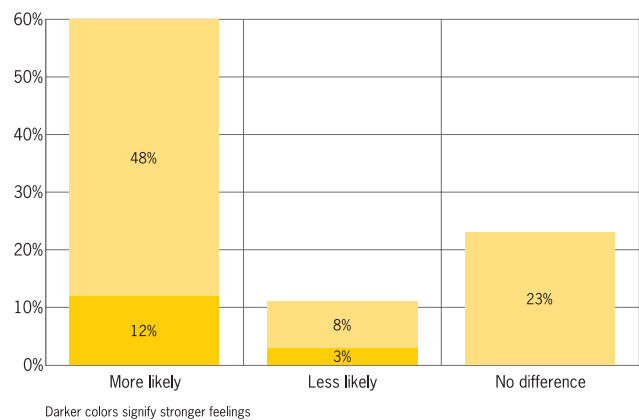
The numbers are about the same when voters were asked about the sincerity of presidential aspirants who claim to put education front and center: 6 percent of voters think presidential candidates are very sincere, while 42 percent judge them somewhat sincere. Instead of rhetoric, voters want presidential candidates to demonstrate that they have an education focus.

**“They know what we like to hear
and they write and say what we
like to hear, but they don’t take
action on the things they say.”**

– Latina focus group participant

Nearly 60 percent of voters say they are more likely to vote for a presidential candidate with education as an administration centerpiece; 11 percent say they are less likely to vote for such a candidate and 23 percent say it makes no difference.

■ ■ Voter Preferences for Education Candidates



Irrespective of demographics or political affiliation, the majority of respondents say they are more likely to support candidates that place education at the forefront of their agendas. In fact, more than 80 percent say they favor a presidential candidate who would fully fund Head Start, reduce class sizes, protect the federal budget from education cuts, and increase teacher pay. Independents, voters under 30, and homemakers are most likely to support pro-education candidates.

Issues such as increasing federal funding for public education, giving families more public school choice, and holding principals and teachers accountable for student performance fall into a middle range of voter support while private school vouchers are at the bottom of the list of voter priorities

■ ■ Positions on Education that Voters Support

What positions would make you more or less likely to support a presidential candidate?	Much more likely	Total more likely	Total less likely
Fully fund Head Start programs	53	87	8
Reduce class size	51	87	7
Protect public education from federal budget cuts	41	83	8
Increase teacher pay	41	82	11
Increase federal funding for public education	34	77	16
Give families more public school choice	32	69	16
Hold principals and administration officials accountable for student performance	31	67	21
Hold teachers accountable for student performance	30	66	22
Increase funding for school construction and modernization	26	72	13
Reverse recent tax cuts and increase funding for public education	26	60	22
Increase federal oversight of local public schools	23	59	26
Use public tax money for vouchers for private schools	12	37	50

“The public is showing mixed support for No Child Left Behind. Last year the basic instinct of voters was to support No Child Left Behind, but few really understood the law. Now, as people are becoming more aware, the support is not as strong.”

– Virginia B. Edwards
Editor and Publisher, *Education Week*

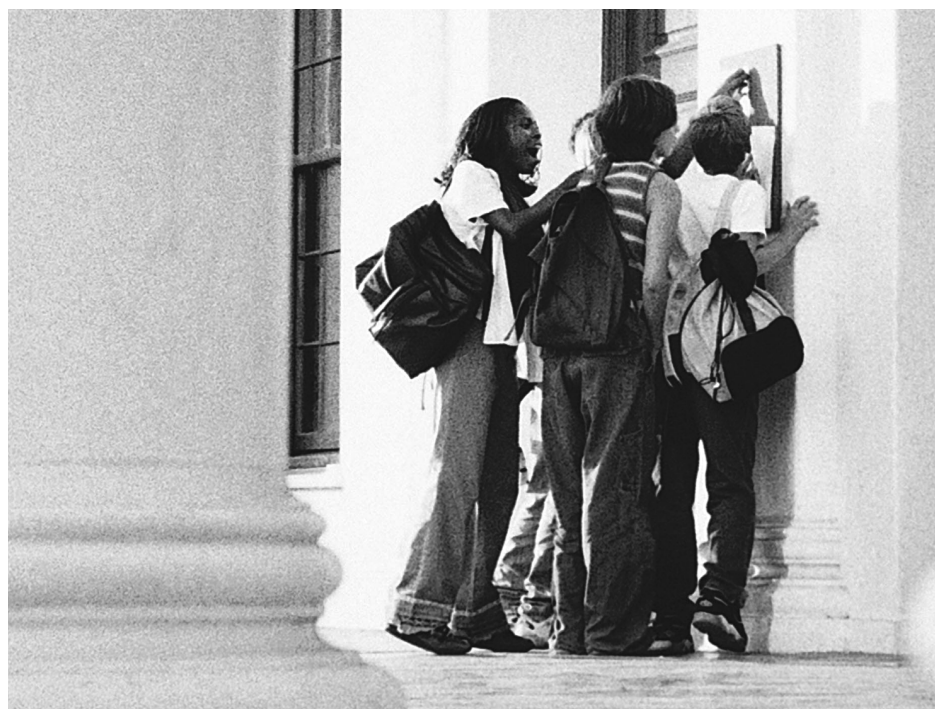
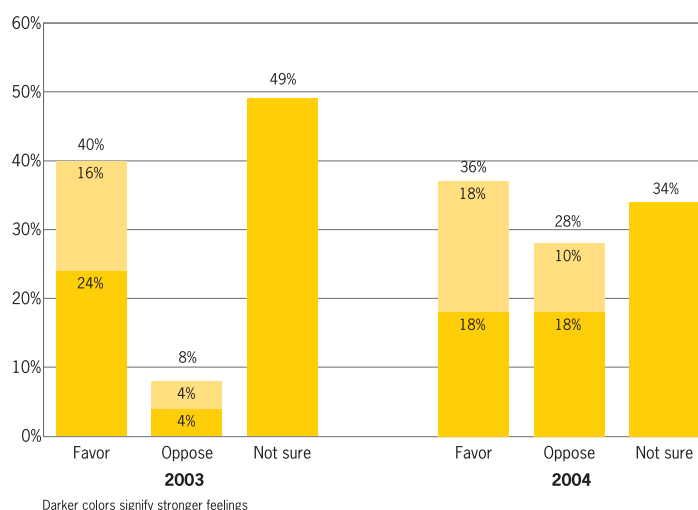
“Well it is pretty obvious that he [President Bush] has the power and he has the ability to make an impact on public education. But right now the focus in the United States is not on what is happening inside the United States; it’s more on what’s happening outside the United States and that’s the issue right there.”

– Latino focus group participant

Voter Response to No Child Left Behind

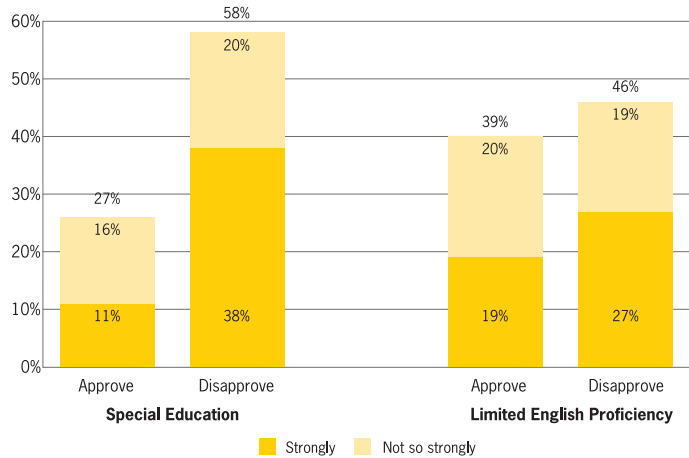
The percentage of voters who have heard about No Child Left Behind (NCLB) grew from 56 percent last year to 75 percent this year. While the percentage of voters who say they favor the law has remained fairly steady—the favorable rating dropped slightly from 40 percent to 36 percent over the past year—the percentage of voters who say they oppose the law has increased by 20 percentage points. In 2003, 8 percent of voters said they opposed the law. This year, 28 percent say they oppose it, including 18 percent who say they strongly oppose it.

■ ■ Voter Response to NCLB



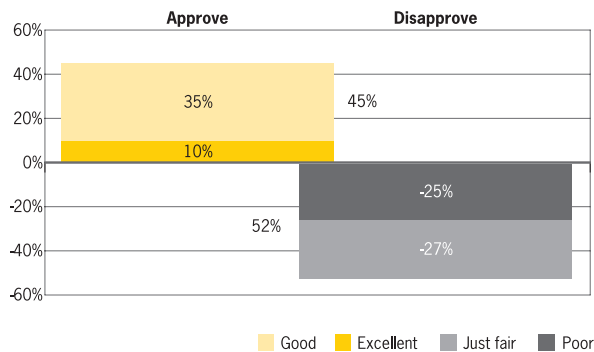
Voters are concerned about funding for NCLB implementation, as well as provisions requiring special education students to take the same tests and perform to the same standards as students without disabilities. Many are also uncomfortable with provisions that hold students with limited English skills to the same standards as native English speakers. Despite strongly held views on "English only" versus bilingual education, our poll indicates that voters are putting children above politics when it comes to education.

■ ■ Voter Response to NCLB Provisions



This year's poll also asked respondents to evaluate President Bush's performance on public education. While 45 percent believe the President is doing a good job on education, with 10 percent saying his performance has been excellent, 52 percent disapproved of his performance, including 25 percent who say he is doing a poor job.

■ ■ Voters Grade President Bush on Education



“I mean I think they [elected leaders] have to be involved. They are our voice. If they are serving us well, they will be serving our needs and worrying about education like we are.”

– white female focus group participant

Supporting Public Schools Through Civic Activity

When asked how active their community is in supporting its public schools, 72 percent of respondents say their community is very active or somewhat active, and 68 percent say their community takes a lot of responsibility for the quality of its public schools.

While there is clear support for public schools—more than half (57 percent) say their community has come together to work on a public education issue—poll responses indicate limited personal participation. In fact, the percentage of voters who say they get personally involved in helping to make their public schools better has declined steadily since 2001, when 49 percent of voters responded affirmatively to this question.

When asked in the 2004 poll if they did anything to support their local schools, 38 percent say they personally did something to make their public schools better in the last year; 34 percent say they are very involved or somewhat involved in making their public schools better.

When asked what involvement they have with their public schools, 61 percent of survey respondents say they attend local events such as sporting events or student performances; 56 percent say they discuss school issues with friends and neighbors; 54 percent say they follow school board activities; and 50 percent say they had signed a petition on education issues.

When it comes to activities that require dedication and time commitment, respondents are less likely to participate. Only 13 percent say they volunteer to work for local candidates who are trying to improve public education; fewer than 1 in 5 (17 percent) volunteer to tutor a child at a local school; and only 27 percent belong to a group that supports local public schools.

While participation rates are low, there was nonetheless wide support for a range of activities as evidenced by the percentage of people who say they are willing to undertake a number of civic activities to support local schools:

- ▶ 80 percent say they are willing to sign a petition on education issues
- ▶ 63 percent say they would vote for more education funding through an increase in tax millages or a bond referendum
- ▶ 55 percent say they would be willing to raise money for a local school or classroom and 53 percent would be willing to join a group that supports local public schools

This suggests there are civic activities, ranging from political activity to group membership to volunteering, that people are willing to undertake on behalf of their public schools in the future, even though their support may have been relatively passive to date.

Attributes of Supportive Communities

What are the attributes of a community that actively supports its public schools? According to respondents, the following are indicators of strong support for public schools:

- ▶ High level of participation in local organizations such as the PTA
- ▶ Residents who are knowledgeable about the positions of local school board members
- ▶ High level of voter turnout for school board elections
- ▶ Availability of data and information on local school performance
- ▶ Monitoring of school board decisions and state and local education policies to determine their impact on public schools

Respondents also named several attributes that they felt defined a community that supports its public schools:

- ▶ High level of parental involvement
- ▶ Strong leadership from office holders who are committed to taking action to improve public schools
- ▶ Young people who are aware of their civic responsibilities and are active in their communities
- ▶ Higher education and cultural institutions that use their resources to enhance teaching and learning opportunities for young people



METHODOLOGY

This national public opinion poll of 1,050 registered voters was conducted by Lake Snell Perry and Associates during the week of January 26–30, 2004. The report includes analysis of a base of 800 male and female voters with an oversample of 125 registered African Americans and 125 registered Latino voters, and also includes information from three focus groups of African Americans, Latinos, and whites, with and without children. The margin of error is +/- 3.5 percent. Tables and charts may not total 100 percent due to rounding. The poll used a split sample technique on specific questions or series of questions to track reactions to different information or language on similar topics.

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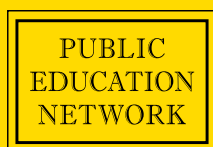
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Additional copies of the report and the poll questions are available upon request from Public Education Network. The report can also be downloaded at www.PublicEducation.org.



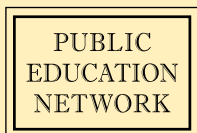
Public involvement. Public education. Public benefit.

Our Vision

Every day, in every community, every child in America benefits from a quality public education.

Our Mission

To build public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for *all* children through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals.



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